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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000714

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SUBJECT: SARGSIAN: KING-MAKER OR WOULD-BE KING?

Classified By: Amb. John M. Evans for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Minister of Defense Serzh Sargsian, frequently cited as a potential presidential candidate in 2008, has been increasing his public visibility in recent months. President Kocharian has refrained from anointing any particular ally as his chosen successor, but his close relationship with Sargsian has fueled persistent rumors that Sargsian is the only genuine contender. The opposition still has no clear leader, and consequently no clear candidate as a successor for Kocharian--a situation they will need to remedy soon if they expect to field a credible candidate in time for the election. We believe that, contrary to opposition accusations, Kocharian has no plans to circumvent the constitution and run for a third term, and that Sargsian is more likely to opt to retain his role as king-maker than he is to go after the presidency himself. End Summary.

SARGSIAN'S SHIFTING PUBLIC IMAGE

2. (S) Over the past year we have noted a deliberate shift in Sargsian's public image (although we believe that press reports that he's moving to a "cuddlier" persona are distinctly exaggerated) -- he has increased his public appearances for non-military events, advocated the possibility of GOAM "concessions" in widely-publicized parliamentary hearings on Nagorno-Karabakh, and has been assiduously courting Western ambassadors. (Note: Armenian MOD General Aghabekian even recently asked a member of the embassy staff off-line whether he thought the U.S. Ambassador would support a Sargsian presidential bid. End Note.) Nonetheless, we believe that Sargsian is more likely to continue in some variation of his current role, remaining at the center of critical policy decisions and in control of both the military and significant economic resources. Sargsian's predecessor as head of the National Security Service (NSS) and his former boss, David Shahnazarian, told us recently that he believed that Sargsian preferred being slightly out of the limelight, and was not seriously interested in the presidency.

IF NOT SARGSIAN, THEN WHO?

3. (C) Among the current members of the governing coalition, Speaker of the National Assembly Artur Baghdasarian and Minister of Justice David Harutunyan are the most frequently named as possible presidential candidates, and their potential personal ambitions are often cited as the reasons for their frequent policy clashes. Baghdasarian, too young to run for president in 2003, has been burnishing his public image and working hard to make himself "presidential" -- largely successfully. Baghdasarian is one of the top names on any pundit's list of 2008 presidential hopefuls, and in the absence of a single opposition candidate, may well be the only potential candidate with a high enough profile to run a credible campaign.

4. (C) Although there are hints that the opposition has begun to start thinking strategically about both the 2007 parliamentary and the 2008 presidential elections, there seems to be little concrete progress toward building the stable alliances and articulating the alternative programs that would be needed for electoral success.

NO EVIDENCE THAT KOCHARIAN WILL RUN AGAIN

5. (C) Although the opposition press continually claims that Kocharian is planning to circumvent the constitution and run for a third term in 2008, we see no evidence that would point to that conclusion, and the opposition, at least thus far, has supported none of its charges with supporting evidence or

facts.

COMMENT: SARGSIAN ENJOYS THE SHADOWS

16. (S) Sargsian's current position affords him control of significant off-budget economic assets, and he does not appear to us to have (or wish to acquire) a politician's temperament. Despite his well-earned reputation as a serious gambler, we believe that he's more likely to continue to play his current hand as power behind the throne rather than go after the throne (and the public scrutiny that would go along with it).
EVANS